

The National Review  
September 1923

## Was Marlowe the Man?

by Archie Webster

[Archie Webster's original essay was published in *The National Review* (VOL.LXXXII, pp.81-86) dated September 1923, and therefore before Hotson's discovery in 1925 of the Coroner's Inquisition concerning Marlowe's death.

Peter Farey]

MORE than a generation ago the learned Professor Dowden called attention to the fact that no theory advanced by scholars explained the *doubts* and *difficulties* of the autobiographic statements made by Shakespeare in the *Sonnets*. While it is obvious that an explanation must exist, all commentators up to the present have been content to elucidate some of the one hundred and fifty-four sonnets and dismiss the balance as a *vexata quæstio*.

The sonnets purport to be a story of Shakespeare's life from his own pen. The story conflicts with all the historic information we have of the Stratford genius, hence the difficulty of explaining it. The story is just as foreign to the history of Francis Bacon, Sir Walter Raleigh, the Earl of Oxford, and sundry others who have been suspected of hiding their poetic talent under the mask name of Shakespeare. It is caviar to all schools.

In many sonnets Shakespeare protests that he is absent from England against his will. His name received a brand (111), and he was a lonely outcast, disgraced in the eyes of men (29). This alleged absence is an abysmal mystery to the scholars, who know nothing of such a period of exile in the career of the Swan of Avon. As to the disgrace, the scholars surmise that the bard felt himself to be branded because he was an actor, and actors are said to have been held in very low repute in that day. This may pass as an explanation of 29 and 111, however feeble it may seem to some of us, but it collapses when applied to many other sonnets, such as, for instance, 36, in which Shakespeare wrote to the Earl of Southampton

I may not evermore acknowledge thee,  
Lest my bewailed guilt should do thee shame

Nor thou with public kindness honour me,  
Unless thou take that honour from thy name.

Shakespeare did acknowledge Southampton by dedicating to him publicly the poems *Venus and Adonis* and *Rape of Lucrece*, and although the Stratford man was an actor, it did not shame or dishonour the earl, nor did the immortal bard ever dream that it would discredit Southampton to have his name thus publicly linked with that of "William Shakespeare."

Of this the bard himself assures us, when he wrote to Southampton (81):

*Your name from hence immortal life shall have,  
Though I, once gone, to all the world must die :*

Your monument shall be my gentle verse,

You still shall live, such virtue hath my pen.

Having written *Venus and Adonis*, the bard knew that it would not disgrace his friend to dedicate it to him as the work of "William Shakespeare," actor though Shakspere might have been. On the contrary, he asserts that it will immortalize Southampton. The bard must have known also that if it did immortalize the name of Southampton, it must, *ipso facto*, immortalize the name of "William Shakespeare", signed to it as author. Therefore, when he says his own name will die with him, although his verse will live for ever, he simply gives us to understand that his own name was not "William Shakespeare," and that he adopted this pen name in acknowledging Southampton, for the very good reason that he offers in 36: his bewailed guilt had disgraced his own name.

There is a theory that explains all of this and all the other autobiographic sonnets written by Shakespeare. In the light of this theory it is only necessary to read the sonnets from first to last in the literal sense in which they were given to us by that unrivalled genius who knew better than all other men how to express ideas in words. It is the theory that "Shakespeare's *Sonnets*" were written by Christopher Marlowe, who was born the same year as the actor of Stratford, and who was, in the words of Swinburne: "The father of English tragedy and the creator of English blank verse."

Marlowe was at Cambridge University with the young Earl of Southampton. He was accused of heresy, the blackest crime on the calendar, just a month before the name "William Shakespeare" first appeared in print, dedicating *Venus and Adonis* to Southampton. And in the sonnets Marlowe tells us that his bewailed guilt made it impossible to publicly acknowledge the earl without doing him shame, and that *Venus and Adonis* will not immortalize the name of its author.

The autobiography in the sonnets begins in 25, wherein the bard says fortune has barred him from *public honours* and proud titles. In 26 he says he dare not show his head where Southampton may test his loyalty and affection. He is forced to abide far from the earl, and can only visit him with his thoughts (27). He is disgraced in the eyes of men, and all alone beweeeps his outcast state (29). His guilt is so great that if Southampton should reveal the name of the man who wrote Shakespeare's poetry, even after he (the bard) is dead, it will make woe for his friend, the earl (71).

When he dies, the earl must not mourn the loss of his body, which is already the prey of worms, being dead "the coward conquest of a wretch's knife" (74). He is dead to all the world except Southampton, and he feels that all the world is dead to him, except the earl (112). His *harmful deeds* have put a brand upon his name (111); but *vulgar scandal* stamped an impression upon his brow that resulted in his being dead to all except Southampton (112). He does not complain that he is thus neglected by all the world, because he is more than compensated by the love of his friend, the earl (112). He does not

miss the external honours of court life, from which he was driven by a suborned informer, who impeached him (125).

Obviously this remarkable and tragic story of his life, from the pen of immortal Shakespeare, has no more to do with the adventures of the Stratford Will Shakspere than with the man in the moon. The story is, however, an accurate journal of the tragic life of Marlowe.

Although born the same year as Shakspere of Stratford, Marlowe's prolific and gifted pen had completely revolutionized English drama and established heroic blank verse through the medium of such plays as *Tamburlaine*, *Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta*, and *Edward II*, before the name Shakespeare appeared upon the scene in 1593.

In that memorable year, Marlowe, at the age of 29, was recognized as the master of all English poets, the creative genius who had given English letters the heroic blank verse that all contemporary poets unhesitatingly adopted. Marlowe's glorious morning was suddenly turned to misery and disgrace. On March 20, 1593, one Richard Cholmeley was arrested for heresy and confessed that he had been converted to "atheism" by Marlowe. This was the worst disgrace conceivable, and its usual punishment was burning at the stake.

On April 28, 1593, the name "William Shakespeare" made its first appearance in print as the author of the poem *Venus and Adonis*. Shakespeare dedicated this poem to the Earl of Southampton, and yet he wrote to the earl in the sonnets:

I may not evermore acknowledge thee  
Lest my bewailed guilt should do thee shame.

On May 18, 1593, a warrant for Marlowe's arrest was issued by the Privy Council, after Richard Bame, a professional spy, had filed a lengthy document with the councillors, impeaching Marlowe as a heretic. And Shakespeare wrote in sonnet 125:

Hence, thou suborned informer! a true soul,  
When most impeached, stands least in thy control.

On May 20, 1593, Marlowe was arrested at the home of Sir Thomas Walsingham, Chiselhurst, to which Bame had directed the bailiffs. He was produced before the Privy Council and was granted bail.

On June 1, 1593, Marlowe was reported to have been stabbed to death by a bawdy serving-man in a lewd brawl at a Deptford inn, three miles from London. No one was arrested for the alleged killing, and no witness to the event is on record. At St. Nicholas Church, Deptford, the register records the burial of "Christopher Marlow, slain by Ffrancis Archer, the 1 of June, 1593." But no grave in the churchyard was marked for Marlowe. And "Shakespeare," in the autumn of life, wrote to the Earl of Southampton this remarkable reminiscence in sonnet 74:

But be contented: when that fell arrest,

*Without all bail shall carry me away,  
My life hath in this line some interest,  
Which for memorial still with thee shall stay.  
When thou reviewest this, thou dost review  
The very part was consecrate to thee:  
The earth can have but earth, which is his due;  
My spirit is thine, the better part of me:  
So, then, thou hast but lost the dregs of life,  
The prey of worms, *my body being dead,*  
*The coward conquest of a wretch's knife,*  
Too base of thee to be remembered.*

Read in the light of Marlowe's authorship this sonnet is clear, coherent, and an accurate statement of fact. Regarded as an emanation from the pen of the Stratford Will Shakspeare, the sonnet has no meaning that any of our profound scholars have been able to discover in three centuries of study.

In this sonnet immortal Shakespeare identifies himself as Marlowe, the father of English tragedy, who was persecuted for his religious opinions, forced to feign death to escape torture at the stake, and compelled to adopt an alias in order to conceal the origin of the precious poems and dramas that he bequeathed us. That is why Shakespeare wrote his sonnets in absence. That is why he says he was a lonely outcast, forced to abide in foreign lands. That is why he dare not show his head where Southampton can prove him. Throughout the sonnets the bard tells us that disgrace has driven him from his native land and the side of his friend, Southampton. Time and again he tells us that all the world thinks he is dead, save Southampton. He says that his name must die with him, and that, if Southampton reveals his name after he is dead, it will make woe for the earl (71)

No longer mourn for me, when I am dead,  
Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell  
Give warning to the world that I am fled  
From this vile world, with vilest worms to dwell:  
Nay, if you read this line, remember not  
The hand that writ it; for I love you so,  
That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot,  
If thinking on me then would make you woe.  
O, if (I say), you look upon this verse,  
When I perhaps compounded am with clay,  
*Do not so much as my poor name rehearse;*  
But let your love even with my life decay;  
*Lest the wise world should look into your moan,*  
*And mock you with me after I am gone.*

Which, of course, would be utterly ridiculous from a man of the name of Shakespeare, the most honoured and celebrated of the Elizabethan poets. But if Marlowe wrote it as a warning to Southampton that the earl is in danger of being charged as an accessory to the flight of a heretic, then it is certainly a rational, common-sense statement.

The bard who described himself in "Shakespeare's *Sonnets*" cannot have been Shakspeare of Stratford, Francis Bacon, the Earl of Oxford, or any other man that has been named so far, unless these sonnets are but a poet's rage, and

The age to come would say "this poet lies."

On the theory that Marlowe wrote the sonnets, there are no *doubts* and *difficulties* in the tragic tale. This theory makes the crooked straight and the rough places plane. It answers the *vexata quæstio* and proves *sufficient* to explain *all* the phenomena of the problem.

Having demonstrated the *sufficiency* of the Marlowe theory in the matter of the *Sonnets*, *Venus and Adonis* and *Rape of Lucrece*, it remains only to determine whether this theory is *necessary* to explain the problem. Obviously it is necessary, unless and until some other sufficient theory is advanced, and to-day no one asserts that such another theory exists.

In this brief paper I have confined myself to a mere outline of the Marlowe theory as it applies to the sonnets and the poems dedicated to Southampton. I have not touched upon the larger question of the authorship of the forty-eight or fifty plays attributed to "Shakespeare," ranging in quality from literary supremacy to low-grade mediocrity. I will say, however, that my examination of the plays and their histories reveals much evidence that Marlowe wrote all of the immortal plays that we are accustomed to speak of as "truly Shakespearean." The same investigation convinces me that Will Shakspeare, of Stratford, who was scarcely able to sign his name to legal instruments, was not the author of even the meanest of the apocryphal plays. His role, I think, was to contribute the use of his name and to remain out of sight and hearing of the London *literati*, which he seems to have done to perfection. For this he was handsomely paid by Southampton, as tradition records, and as his sudden affluence in 1597 would seem to confirm.

It is my conclusion that Marlowe, reported dead in 1593, not only lived to see the sonnets printed in 1609, but was alive to make many revisions of the plays that appeared in the first folio, 1623. Such plays as *Othello* (1622); *King John* (1591-1622); *Richard III* (1597-1622) and others seem to have been substantially altered and revised within the year preceding the folio of 1623. The revisions in every case (except, perhaps, *Hamlet*) seem to have improved the earlier work of the immortal bard, and therefore it was either the work of *the* immortal bard or of some genius entitled to rank with or above "Shakespeare."

I regret that limitations of space forbid any attempt to present even an outline of the argument concerning Marlowe's authorship of *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Othello*, and the other great plays in this paper.

*Archie Webster*